New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1949

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"The Traitor"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
APRIL 1, 1949

Lee Tracy Is Excellent In Lively Melodrama

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

With Lee Tracy giving a characteristically delightful performance as a harried Naval Intelligence officer, "The Traitor," which Jed Harris brought to the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre last night, emerges as a good cops-and-robbers melodrama about Russian atomic espionage. As a serious study of the emotional and intellectual stresses and strains of the period of the cold war, the new play by Herman Wouk isn't very impressive, but, once the dashing American operatives have got on the trail of the foreign spies and their local dupes, the action is brisk, lively and generally entertaining.

Since ours is a melodramatic age, there is no reason why its serious problems shouldn't be contemplated in terms of melodrama. It seems likely that Mr. Wouk planned to use his thriller as the springboard for an earnest consideration of the manner in which misplaced idealism can twist loyalties, with particular attention to the spiritual attraction that the Soviet Union, despite its ruthlessness, can still have for men of good will. Unfortunately, he is too superficial about it to be impressive or provocative, despite all his attempts to be fair and objective, but he and Mr. Harris do know their melodrama.

Atomic Scientist

The title figure of "The Traitor" is not a Communist, but a thoughtful young atomic scientist, with no high regard for Marxism, who sincerely believes that the best way to stop the coming of war is to let the Russians in on the secret of the atom bomb. With both sides possessing such a terrible weapon, he feels that they would have to get together to work out a way to avoid the mutual suicide of a new world struggle. When trapped by Naval Intelligence, he sees the error of his path and helps in the trapping of the big-shot Russian secret agent. His reformation, by the way, struck me as one of the play's least believable moments.

Nor did it seem to me that the author was persuasive when he suddenly advised us, through the upright liberal philosopher played by Walter Hampden, that the betrayal of his trust by the foolish young scientist justifies a temporary adjournment of the American right of free speech in the colleges. I thought he was on sounder ground when pointing out that the worst aspect of the familiar Communist skulduggery was the blow it struck at liberal principles. But, as I have said, the intellectual quality of the play cannot be taken too seriously. It is the excitement of seeing U. S. counter-intelligence at work that counts.

Lee Tracy

The most important feature of the evening was the return of Lee Tracy after far too long an absence from the stage. It is to be profoundly hoped that Mr. Tracy stays in the theatre where he belongs. For he is an extraordinarily winning and adroit actor, dynamic, vital, shrewd, knowing and strangely graceful. He is every bit as brilliant a performer as he was when he and Jed Harris were setting the town on fire with "Broadway" and "The Front Page," and there is no one quite like him left. His portrayal of the worried and likeable Captain Gallagher is a gem of charming, humorous and three-dimensional acting.

Under Mr. Harris' shrewd direction, all of the performances add to the play's effectiveness. Walter Hampden is particularly good as the sympathetic old philosopher, Wesley Addy gives one of his best characterizations in the title role, Richard Derr is excellent as a young Naval lieutenant, and John Wengraf, always a striking player, has an impressive scene as the Russian agent. It must be said of "The Traitor" that it reduces a serious matter to trivial terms, but it is also true that, if it sacrifices thoughtfulness to excitement, it makes a surprisingly lively and entertaining job of it.

'THE TRAITOR'

Play by Herman Wouk; staged by Jed Harris; setting by Raymond Sovey; costumes by Joseph Fretwell 3d; presented by Jed Harris at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre, March 31, 1949. The cast:

Prof. Tobias Emanuel.....Walter Hampden
Jane Bailey.....Louise Platt
Margaret.....Georgia Simmons
Prof. Allen Carr...Wesley Addy
Eva McKeon.....Jean Hagen
Lt. Henderson....Richard Derr
Mr. Fislinger...James Van Dyk
Capt. Gallagher.....Lee Tracy
Reynolds..William Thunhurst Jr.
Chief Wilson...Maurice Manson
Lt. Smith.....James Davidson
Hammontree....Michael Abbott
First Man.....Gene Blakely
Second Man.....Larry Sherman
Stricko.....Michael Dreyfuss
A Man.....Philip Coolidge
Another Man.....John Wengraf
Chief Pharmacist's Mate...Don Doherty

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place in the living room of the ground floor apartment of Prof. Emanuel in upper Manhattan near a university. Time—The present. Act I, Scene 1, An afternoon in March. Scene 2, Evening. Act II, Scene 1, Five minutes later. Scene 2, 11:05 that same night.

Journal American
APRIL 1, 1949

An Exciting Spy Yarn And a Resounding Hit

By ROBERT GARLAND

In the theatre, as elsewhere, Jed Harris is adventurous. This time, all on his own, he has turned to Herman Wouk's "The Traitor," a spy play with atomic implications. If, as it unfolds at the 48th Street, the play doesn't send shivers down your spine, its implications will.

A college graduate, a radio gagman, a dollar-a-year Washingtonian, a Navy deck-officer and a novelist, "The Traitor" is Mr. Wouk's first play. And if a play is a dramatic composition to be acted in public on a stage, it's an effective one. It holds an audience even beyond its tragic end.

There's more to Herman Wouk's effective play than meets the casual ear and eye. In this confused one-world-or-none of ours, there's the disturbing question of man's loyalty to man. It may also be the disturbing question of the self-preservation of the so-called human race.

Should Allen Carr be first a citizen of the world or a citizen of his own United States? And if, like an off-stage figure you could mention, he decides to be a modern man without a country, how far distant should his loyalties go from his—to him—old copybook Americanism?

* * *

Trusted Assistant

Slowly, maybe, but surely, "The Traitor" gets under way. You meet young Professor Carr in Old Professor Emanuel's living room. It's on the ground floor of an apartment in upper Manhattan near a university which—although it doesn't say so—might be the playwright's Columbia.

Young Allen is Old Tobias' trusted assistant and, apparently, loyal friend. Together, they're up to their supposedly good American necks in a hush-hush atomic experiment in which a thorium plate is critically involved. Being a Jed Harris production, all this scientific small-talk is technical.

For reasons not without foundation, Allen Carr is suspected of more than latent sympathy to the Communistic cause. Only Tobias Emanuel is certain of his Americanism. But finally, assisted by a Geiger counter and a Captain Gallagher, even the Old Professor is convinced that—

Well, technically, Allen Carr is the traitor of the title. Has he not been willing to betray a United States he knows for a United World of which he is uncertain? If that's not a traitor, what does traitor mean? So, having merely betrayed his own ideals, he dies.

* * *

Acting Excellent

Which gives you no great knowledge of the excitement of "The Traitor" as a spy play. I have, I fear, overstressed the implications of Mr. Wouk's on-stage story-telling. These implications are all-too-obviously at hand, but you can—and often do—ignore them for the piece's entertainment.

Under the producer's own direction, the acting is, in 18 cases out of 19, everything it could be. The sole exception is the Captain Gallagher of Lee Tracy. Returning after all-too-many years, Mr. Tracy is inclined to add mugging to his otherwise un-Hollywoodcn performance.

But Walter Hampden, soon to celebrate his 50th anniversary as a live actor on a stage, is fine and mugless as Professor Tobias Emanuel whose faith is stronger than his judgment. Or is it? You'll applaud the Allen Carr of Wesley Addy, the Big Man Around the Kremlin of John Wengraf...

If Herman Wouk's "The Traitor" isn't a resounding hit, I don't know a resounding hit when Jed Harris has one. If you frighten easily, forget its scary implications and concentrate on its exciting spy stuff. That, too, will send shivers down your theatre-going spine.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

APRIL 1, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Timely and Dynamic

A FIRST play of remarkable ideological and dramatic tension has been smartly mounted at the Forty-eighth Street Theater. "The Traitor," by Herman Wouk, contemplates a young physicist, who is impelled to give away top-level atomic secrets to Communist agents in the belief that it will lead to world peace. The author has found a brilliant balance between a running discussion of treason and a head-on collision between foreign espionage and naval intelligence. Jed Harris has produced and staged the work with canny showmanship, intrusting leading roles to Lee Tracy, Wesley Addy, Walter Hampden and John Wengraf. There is no more resolution of the play's central thesis than the violent deaths of the scientist and the chief spy, but timely and perplexing problems are afforded fascinating theatrical focus.

* * *

Against a handsome Raymond Sovey setting of a professor's apartment in upper Manhattan, "The Traitor" packs its action tightly into a period of a few hours. In their hectic course, abstract philosophy, loyalty tests, the flaws in our democratic system, the position of the U. S. S. R. and the mysteries of atomic energy are touched upon with clarity and stage excitement. Wouk has conceived convincing characters rather than stock figures. He has given them good dialogue as well as melodramatic activity, while leavening his script with considerable suspense. The final scenes, which find the philosophy professor urging his traitorous colleague to redeem himself, and the latter exposing the machinations of a spy ring, have a definite let-down, but the offering is a fine initial effort.

* * *

It could scarcely have had better ministrations. Tracy, making his first stage appearance here in nearly a decade, is dynamic and wryly humorous as Captain Gallagher, the head of a Naval Intelligence team, who admits that he himself may be a numbskull, but demonstrates that his operation comes down over an idealistic contemporary Benedict Arnold and a ruthless and mercenary Russian spy like a tent. Working under Harris's imaginative direction again after all these years, he makes constant liaison between ideas and violent action. Addy is excellent in the title role, having the same contempt for people in his pursuit of world peace that the Russians are charged with in the exposition. His death-bed adherence to his original plan of treason, after delivering the Communist agents, is foggy. So is his romance with the professor's secretary, played nicely by Louise Platt. On the whole, it is a perceptive and disturbing performance.

* * *

Wengraf plays the top spy with vigorous authority, although it has taken Wouk some over-long speeches to establish the fellow's motives. It turns out that he has merely sold out to the highest bidder. The professor that Hampden creates is a man of sensibility and a deep conviction in tolerance until he is caught up in an act of treason. Richard Derr, Philip Coolidge and Gene Hagen assist in keeping the interpretation volatile and pertinent. Harris has given "The Traitor" the pace and urgency that it demanded. A play of promise and no mean achievement has been eloquently projected at the Forty-eighth Street.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 1, 1949

'The Traitor' Is Exciting, Intelligent Drama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

With "The Traitor," Herman Wouk proves that a melodrama can be both exciting and intelligent. The town's newest thriller arrived at the 48th Street Theatre last evening under the Jed Harris banner, and held a first-night audience spellbound.

"The Traitor" deals with academic loyalty. At the rise of the curtain, the trustees of an eastern university have decided to oust Communists. Professor Tobias Emanuel has decided not to fill out and sign a loyalty-check questionaire sent him. Professor Emanuel had been selected as a sort of test case because of his eminence as a philosopher.

By the play's end, however, he has changed his mind, after his protege, a brilliant young physicist, has fallen into the clutches of a Soviet spy ring. The protege, Professor Allen Carr, sincerely believed that by giving the Reds atomic secrets he was helping to prevent another war. Trapped by Naval Intelligence and coming to a realization that he was being played for a sucker by a ruthless gang of foreign agents, he agreed to cooperate in rounding up the Red spies.

Since it is against the rules of suspense-play reporting to give all its secrets in advance, we suggest that you see "The Traitor" for the denouement. It races the pulses.

As for Professor Emanuel, the scandalous and heartbreaking revelations persuade him that adherents of a foreign government should not be given freedom to recruit immature stooges on our university campuses. Even philosophic liberalism cannot condone and aid treachery to the U. S.

Walter Hampden etches a dignified, civilized and immensely moving portrait of the liberal Professor Emanuel. He encompasses all of the perplexities and tragedies that ensue when his philosophy is stacked up against a cynical, unscrupulous and destructive ideology.

Lee Tracy, too long absent in Hollywood, makes a triumphant return to the Broadway stage as a wryly humorous, sometimes unlucky but thoroughly efficient intelligence officer. Wesley Addy is excellent as the befuddled scientist. John Wengraf is first-rate in a role that you will remember.

Salutes also are due Louise Platt, Georgia Simmons, Philip Coolidge, Richard Derr and James Van Dyk for other meritorious contributions.

Producer Harris, doubling in brass as director, has teamed with Wouk to give us an adult chiller. "The Traitor" is a play that will make you think, while it grips your attention. The Communists aren't going to like it, but who cares? Thank God, there are enough good American playgoers left to make it the hit it deserves to be.

New York World-Telegram

APRIL 1, 1949

'The Traitor' Opens; An Atom Age Thriller

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is a sense of pulsing melodrama in town in "The Traitor," as hot as tomorrow's newspaper. It features a thrilling modern cops and robbers incident, international in implication like the most exciting real stories of our day. And it by no means neglects an editorial policy, clear and straightforward enough to demand no intricate cogitation.

The play draws on actual incidents that have happened frequently around us, and compresses their drama into a few hours. Action takes precedence over motives, though the conflict of logic is clear, as a top atomic scientist attempts to place loyalty to mankind above loyalty to his country.

Tries His Contacts.

Professor Carr believes that if he gives the Communists a new inexpensive formula for making atomic fuel, the dual fear of the democracies and the dictators will lead to a permanent stalemate in an effective peace conference, and the danger of the cold war leading to open hostilities will be ended.

Making a trial of his contacts with valueless but restricted papers, he immediately becomes one of numerous suspects who are investigated by the Central Intelligence Service.

It so happens that his fiancee has taken snapshots near his desk of the older professor who has befriended him. An ostensibly casual visitor, a naval intelligence officer, realizes that the films have been spoiled by proximity to radioactive material.

With all the excitement of a wild west chase, the room is scrutinized with a Geiger counter.

then wired with microphones and guarded. The philosopher professor is prevailed on to make the younger man reveal his plan.

A Thrilling Finale.

When a Naval captain convinces the traitor that he has devastated his own career and life, and the honor of all the people around him, he agrees to aid in the capture of the spies, and cagily draws into the net their chief at the cost of his own life, in a thrilling finale.

For a long time it has seemed that the theater could not produce the old-time mystery melodramas that used to make audiences' hair stand on end. "The Traitor" would seem to be the answer. It has all the excitement "The Bat" did in its day, but apace with the times, instead of screaming over one mad killer; it has its say about the world conflict that is close to everyone now.

After a conversational opening stanza which sets the characters and their relationships, the play settles down into taut action, which, under Jed Harris' theatrical magic, never lets up in excitement until the end.

Lee Tracy deserves another gold stripe for his deft performance as the naval captain, turning the difficult trick of playing in an authenticity comic vein over the tensest situations.

Walter Hampden is warm and rich as the distraught philosophy professor. His is rare dignity and style, as always.

Wesley Addy is most effective in the title role, progressing from intent detachment to wracked hysteria with believability, and Louise Platt and Richard Derr are a personable and human young couple.

John Wengraf adds a brief but revealing portrait of exalted contemptuousness as the leader of the spies.

The New York Times

APRIL 1, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Herman Wouk has written a second-rate melodrama about a first-rate subject. In "The Traitor," which was acted at the Forty-eighth Street last evening, he catches a brilliant scientist in the process of giving secret information about atomic energy to a Russian spy. Prof. Allen Carr violates his oath of loyalty to the United States because he thinks the peace of the world would be assured if Russia had the atomic bomb.

This is an important subject, not only for political reasons but for ethical reasons that bear on other timely questions which fill a good many people today with the most serious misgivings. Mr. Wouk touches on them briefly by associating Carr with a venerable philosopher of high ethical principles and by introducing as Carr's fiancée an intelligent young lady of decent political convictions.

* * *

Not being able to write with much perception on that level, Mr. Wouk has pitched "The Traitor" on the lower level of vendible melodrama. In the first scene, Naval Intelligence officers suspect that Dr. Carr is giving information to Russian spies. In the course of the evening they catch him at it and then persuade him, in turn, to help them catch the chief Russian spy.

With Lee Tracy playing the part the American Naval Intelligence officer, the spy hunt settles down to routine excitements toward the end of the first act. Standing in the director's box, Jed Harris keeps the stage swarming with efficient naval personnel, to say nothing of quite a lot of ostentatiously ingenious spy paraphernalia. You never saw so many spy-hunters pop into and out of doors and windows or connect so many mechanical gadgets to radios and telephones. "The Traitor" is "Superman" with a noble message.

* * *

It is good hokum cops-and-robbers playmaking at the point of two pistols. Mr. Tracy has not forgotten the nervous tensions of Broadway" and "The Front Page"; he plays for laughs as energetically as he saves the honor of the United States. The sinister master-spy of Russia is played with cynical assurance by John Wengraf. Shots are fired. Red flares blaze off-stage. "The Traitor" makes use of all the regulation show staples except the American flag and a bugler blowing taps in the last scene.

Hokum melodrama is a legitimate commodity in the theatre, although Mr. Harris has directed melodramas more skillfully in the past. But Mr. Wouk has written this one against the background of intellectual and moral values he raises in the first act about the ethics of loyalty tests in university faculties and about the wisest way to secure the peace of the world. Most of us would appreciate an inquiry into those topics.

As an eminent philosopher, Walter Hampden represents moral anguish with a sincerity that has to be respected. In the part of Professor Carr, Wesley Addy represents the arrogance and fanaticism of pure intellect with considerable skill in the acting. Louise Platt's function as Carr's fiancée is to look terribly hurt, which is something she can do quite persuasively.

* * *

But Mr. Wouk is no Sartre yet, either as publicist or melodramatist. Although Raymond Sovey's setting of a professor's living-room is profound and grave, the writing is trivial and the melodrama opportunistic. When "they get to work on contemporary political subjects, the Soviet dramatic hacks write in this vein for the edification of "the peace-loving masses." From the point of view of intelligent theatre, it is as depressing in New York as it is in Moscow.

DAILY NEWS

APRIL 1, 1949

Lee Tracy a Grand Spy-Catcher In A-Bomb Thriller, 'The Traitor'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

This morning's hero in the grateful eyes of this department is Mr. Lee Tracy, who is one swell actor. When he comes onstage at the 48th St. Theatre with his Geiger counter things begin to click, and no pun meant. (The counter clicks, of course, as it snoops around Prof. Walter Hampden's apartment for the makings of an atom bomb.)

Mr. Tracy, Mr. Hampden, the Geiger gadget and a slick supporting cast are employed by Jed Harris in a spy melodrama by Herman Wouk, "The Traitor," which had its premiere last evening. Now and then the play is what impatient people will call talky; but, since I have an odd fondness for listening, and because "The Traitor" also has some fine cloak-and-dagger excitement, I was a happy and satisfied first-nighter.

Mr. Wouk, a new dramatist, tells about a college scientist who is preparing to feed atom bomb information to a Russian spy ring. Not for money, or out of disloyalty, but because he thinks that if both sides have the thing there will be less chance of either side using it. Naval Intelligence moves in, in the person of Capt. Tracy; the secret of the bomb is saved and a devilishly clever enemy agent is done in.

A Spring Tonic.

"The Traitor" is a bit more than plain melodrama—which is where the talk comes in. One has to listen to the young professor, played by Wesley Addy, and allow him the privilege of thinking the way he thinks. One must listen to an older professor, Mr. Hampden, whose business is philosophy, as he considers the ethical values of Red-hunting among the college faculty. It is sound if familiar talk and it contributes a note of reason to the play.

Mr. Tracy, who hasn't been around here for eight or nine years, is a Spring tonic. His gravelly voice, his drive, his mugging, his timing and his infallible instinct for comedy make him a remarkably effective actor. He pretends to be pretty dumb for a four-striper, but when he begins to deploy his wiretappers and counter-espionage agents one has a feeling that the man he is after will come to no good end.

Mr. Harris seems to be incapable of doing a bad job in putting a play upon a stage; his failures are just as good work as his hits. He knows casting and he knows what to do with actors once they've been hired. The company in "The Traitor" is excellent, with Mr. Hampden and Mr. Addy debating ethics convincingly and with John Wengraf being remarkably and charmingly evil as a professional spy.

Everything Works.

Louise Platt (social note: Mrs. Harris' ex-wife) is effective as Mr. Addy's worried sweetheart, Richard Derr is pleasant as one of Mr. Tracy's spy-chasers, and the less important members of the crew all work as though they were the most important ones in the outfit—which is what good show business should be like and too seldom is.

Raymond Sovey has devised a handsome living room for the proceedings, with plenty of places for hiding dictographs. And that confounded Geiger counter really works. I wonder if Mr. Harris, a very painstaking gent, went to the trouble of making an atom bomb for his show.

The Sun

APRIL 1, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

'The Traitor' Adroit Melodrama.

Herman Wouk's "The Traitor," given Jed Harris's expert and professional direction, and skillfully played by an able cast, is a searching inquiry into Communism and its machinations, told in terms of adroit melodrama. The first performance was given last night at the 48th Street Theater.

"The Traitor" is a tricky and ingenious play, crowded with interesting documentation; it is always, after a slow start, good theater. And it brings Lee Tracy back to the New York scene with a driving and dynamic performance. Here's one actor who returns to the theater better than he was before he went West. He was magnificent last night.

In his writing of "The Traitor," which may be intended by its author as a savage indictment of Communism and the subversive tactics of a hostile Soviet, Playwright Wouk presents the case of a brilliant young professor, an atomic expert, who is considering giving vital information to Russia in the belief that two-country possession of the atomic bomb will serve as a guarantee of world peace. The Naval Intelligence gets relentlessly on his trail, he admits his traitorious intentions, and he finally is killed in an effort to correct his mistake.

Even if you take issue with the point of view of "The Traitor" and do not go along with its philosophy and do not accept the motivation of some of its characters, "The Traitor" does come through as a theater piece that remains steadily dramatic once it gets going, and it is always helped along by the performances of Lee Tracy, Walter Hampden and associates.

Tracy appears as a wry, dry, self-critical naval captain who lost his sea command after a collision and is still trying to justify his existence and to be of use to his country as a bloodhound in naval secret service. This actor, after a long absence from Broadway, is a master of timing and of tempo; he is sharp, tense and expert in his playing, and his Capt. Gallagher emerges as a genuine person.

Walter Hampden is excellent as an aging and distinguished professor — kindly, tolerant and wise — who is brought to a realization of the perils of Communism by the revelations of a single evening. Wesley Addy gets a great deal of force into his characterization as the tortured and confused intellectual, who was willing to become Russia's ally on the theory that he was serving the cause of world peace. Richard Derr is a vigorous naval lieutenant, caught up in the spy-chasing. Louise Platt gives an attractive performance and John Wengraf is a vital actor as the crafty Russian spy — a Hessian-like character, a non-Russian, ostensibly in the refrigerator business in Newark, and who has been promised two and a half million and a farm in Sweden by the Soviet for the completion of his assignment.

Raymond Sovey's setting for the living room in the old professor's apartment is a job of detailed realism. "The Traitor" is a tense melodrama, a good show. And Lee Tracy is simply great.

"The Biggest Thief in Town"

DAILY NEWS

MARCH 31, 1949

In 'Biggest Thief in Town' a Stiff Revives Too Late to Be Any Help

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Biggest Thief in Town," which Lee Sabinson presented last evening at the Mansfield Theatre, is a high school farce whose chief but insufficient claim to quality is the presence of Thomas Mitchell in the role of a hard-drinking undertaker.

Now and again the play offers a moment of real amusement—but now and again is not often enough for three whole acts, and between times there is some pretty sorry humor. Dalton Trumbo, the author, has stuck himself with the job of being funny about the death of the meanest and richest man in town and the task seems to have appalled him. Getting the play onto a stage was apparently no less appalling to the director, Herman Shumlin, who has permitted more acters to wave more hands and point more fingers than a good director should allow.

Mr. Mitchell is the undertaker in a Colorado town, Shale City (which might be Mr. Trumbo's Western Slope birthplace, Montrose). The meanest and richest man in town is about to die, and when he dies Mr. Mitchell and a doctor friend of his, Walter Abel, kidnap the corpse in order to get the business away from a big, classy mortuary outfit in Denver.

Corpse Revives.

The corpse comes alive, which is one of the funny moments of the play as Undertaker Mitchell does a double-take—and from there on Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Abel, Mr. Trumbo and Mr. Shumlin are stuck with it.

There is a great deal of drinking and philosophizing in "The Biggest Thief in Town," and the conversation gets as stiff as the actors pretend to be. Mr. Mitchell is a gifted and wonderful fellow who outclasses his playmates, including Dr. Abel, Russ Brown and Rhys Williams.

There is a bit of a love story tossed into the play, involving the undertaker's daughter and a young man. The daughter, Lois Nettleton, is one of the evening's chief hand-wavers, and the young man, Robert Readick, gives the only other good performance of the evening.

If I were Mr. Trumbo, I'd leave mortuary literature to Evelyn Waugh. Mr. Trumbo is much too serious a fellow to monkey with it.

'THE BIGGEST THIEF IN TOWN'

Play by Dalton Trumbo; staged by Herman Shumlin; setting by Leo Kerz; costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith; presented by Lee Sabinson at the Mansfield Theatre, March 30, 1949. The cast:

Bert Hutchins..Thomas Mitchell
Horton Paige.....Russ Brown
Laurie Hutchins..Lois Nettleton
Buddy Gwynne...Robert Readick
Dr. Jay Stewart....Walter Abel
Miss Tipton.....Charity Grace
Sam Wilkins.....Rhys Williams
Dr. Rolfe Willow..Brent Sargent
Col. Jared Rumley...Fay Roope
John Troybalt..William J. Kelly
1st Nurse..Alexander Lockwood
2nd Nurse.....Ben Metz

Synopsis: Scene: Bert Hutchins' undertaking parlor, in Shale City, Col. Time: The present. A spring evening.

"The Biggest Thief in Town"—*continued*

The New York Times

MARCH 31, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

To enjoy "The Biggest Thief in Town," which opened at the Mansfield last evening, you have to do Dalton Trumbo one favor. You have to agree that an undertaker's parlor is a comic place and that body-snatching is hilarious. To judge by the laughter in the theatre last evening, many people have no difficulty in agreeing with Mr. Trumbo's ghoulish point of view. But it is only fair to warn the reader that this review is written by a man who does not drop dead from laughter every time the undertaking business is mentioned and who has never performed a practical joke in a morgue.

* * *

Mr. Trumbo is an industrious joke-smith who knows how to pound a comedy together. In the first scene he gives you a folksy undertaker in Shale City, Col., who is bemoaning the fact that he is probably not going to get the funeral of the one rich man in town. After consuming several drinks of rye neat, the undertaker and his crony devise an audacious scheme. They decide to remove the rich man's body boldly from his house before the family have called the most fashionable undertaking firm in Denver.

They succeed in this unethical enterprise. After Mr. Trumbo has exhausted the jocularity of body-snatching, he brings the corpse to life in the middle of the second act. By the time he has got through the fun this occasions, his comedy is happily over.

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Under Herman Shumlin's direction, there is some excellent comic acting in "The Biggest Thief in Town." Thomas Mitchell has never been more enjoyable. As the exuberant undertaker he is immensely expert and humorously convivial in the racy style of his tosspot acting in "Stagecoach." Walter Abel, Russ Brown and Rhys Williams are vastly enjoyable as local drinking companions.

Although the character of the corpse is not exactly a fat part, William J. Kelly is sufficiently waspish with the few lines the author has given him. Lois Nettleton is pleasantly fresh and disarming as the undertaker's daughter, and Robert Readick does well by the casual part of her suitor. To house Mr. Trumbo's grim horseplay Leo Kerz has designed an attractive small-town store worthy of a more genuine play.

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For quite apart from the nature of Mr. Trumbo's jest, "The Biggest Thief In Town" is not a genuine piece of playwriting. It is put together with scotch tape. Some of it seems to be intended as a thoughtful look into the brooding mind of a small-town father. Some of it is low comedy, and most of it is drenched in whisky which would start pouring over the footlights if there were another act. Mr. Trumbo's actors will all have kidney trouble if his comedy has an extended run.

As for the uproariousness of a drunken undertaker on a spree, that is a matter of taste. To one morose member of the audience, "The Biggest Thief in Town" is about as funny as a funeral.

Daily Mirror

MARCH 31, 1949

'Biggest Thief in Town' Is At The Mansfield

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Having delighted us a couple of seasons ago with "Finian's Rainbow," Lee Sabinson repelled us last evening with a macabre farce called "The Biggest Thief in Town." It's from Dalton Trumbo's typewriter, and you will find it at the Mansfield Theatre—that is, if you're in the market for corny jokes about death.

The new arrival has to do with a small-town undertaker who wants to capitalize on the demise of an unscrupulous millionaire. So anxious is the mortician to make a killing that, after a drinking bout with a local doctor, he snatches the old boy from his sick-room too soon. To his amazement and chagrin, there's still a little life left in the curmudgeon.

The mortician, usually a pretty nice fellow, develops a larcenous streak to further the dancing career of his pretty daughter. He learns in the nick of time that the crooked tycoon hasn't a dime to his name, and manages to come out with a profit anyway from an ambitious rival. As for the daughter, she marries a winged-footed soda jerker, and they determine to make the terpsichorean grade on their own.

All the action takes place in a funeral parlor, which appeared to be something more in the nature of a saloon. The mortician, the doctor, a druggist and a newspaper editor go on first-rate benders, and have a high old time of it tossing off Joe Millers about corpses, easy money, religion and life.

Thomas Mitchell, Walter Abel, Rhys Williams and Russ Brown labor valiantly and skillfully to lure chuckles from dubious hokum. Lois Nettleton and Robert Readick are good as the young dancers.

Herman Shumlin directed with an eye to howls, rather than subtlety. Leo Kerz designed a setting sufficiently realistic to give you the jitters.

It is only fair to state that many first-nighters roared and applauded hysterically throughout much of the evening. However, we cannot recommend "The Biggest Thief in Town" to playgoers with sensitivity and good taste. We do not think it will have a wide appeal.

The Sun

MARCH 31, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Dreary Play at Mansfield.

Dalton Trumbo has written an irksome and garrulous play in "The Biggest Thief in Town," all about the goings-on in an undertaking parlor in Shale City, Col., and put on last evening at the Mansfield. Supposedly a comedy, this new piece drags on interminably, and it brings forth some of the most emphatic and clamorous performances of the season.

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Here is the tale of a plodding small-town mortician, on the verge of insolvency, who steals what he believes to be the corpse of the ailing and venerable John Troybalt, the meanest man in the community and reputedly the wealthiest. He comes to life after he has been brought into the funeral home and after the undertaker has been promised a $20,000 fee. They take old John back to his fabulous retreat atop Mount Miracle and there he dies all over again—this time for keeps.

"The Biggest Thief in Town" isn't funny. It is ghoulish, offensive and very dull. A great deal of the evening is devoted to the laborious drinking sessions of Mortician Hutchins and his doctor friend as they sit around a small table with a big bottle.

This new play calls upon the professional services of some able and interesting players — such people as Thomas Mitchell, Walter Abel, Rhys Williams and Russ Brown—but they don't do much with "The Biggest Thief in Town," or for it. They really don't act the play; they shout it. Nearly everybody goes in for considerable bellowing.

I could have taken more of William J. Kelly, who has the role of the testy old gentleman who doesn't stay dead, and who seemed to be as annoyed to find himself breathing as the others were to have him doing so. Robert Readick gives a straightforward and vigorous performance as the confident young man who marries the undertaker's daughter.

"The Biggest Thief in Town" is a straining and tiresome play. The best thing about it is the setting for the funeral parlor that has been designed by Leo Kerz.

New York World-Telegram

MARCH 31, 1949

Tom Mitchell Buoys 'The Biggest Thief'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Biggest Thief in Town" is often a red letter field day for good actors, which it currently has in its cast. In fact, it provides the star, Thomas Mitchell with three or four situations to which he reacts with momentous and unforgettable comic effect.

The play as a whole is inclined to resemble the little girl who had a little curl. When it is at its best, which is when it is most profane, fortunately most of the time, it is very funny. At other times it seems loose-limbed and stubbornly single-minded.

A crooked and fabulously wealthy tycoon is dying in his palace on a lonely Colorado mountain, and the extinguishing of a hitherto permanent light up there will spread the news to the eagerly waiting little town below.

No one has anything but contempt for old Troybalt, but his death will most immediately affect Bert Hutchins, the undertaker, who has an option on the only bronze casket west of New York. Waiting for the death signal, Bert and his doctor friend, Jay, soak up plenty of liquor and kidnap the corpse so Bert can profit by arranging the entire funeral.

Their fine plans are given a rude jolt when it is found that Troybalt is not so dead as he seemed, and furthermore, that when he does die his entire estate will collapse. Bert manages to worm out from under the effects of his misdeed, and in the end the expensive casket is practically forced off his hands at a profit.

The play is concerned almost entirely with the attitudes of delight expressed at the death of the dishonest old man. Whether it sounds likely or not, these are often hilarious. It is also a portrayal of constant drinking and progressive inebriation of the four main characters, a highly monotonous procedure.

Whatever morality may have originally been intended here is too cloudy to make much point. The old man is mourned by nobody, as during his final illness his own family is busy getting more wildly drunken than the town people. The point of Bert's transgression of ethics in taking the body is lost, when his daughter, for whom he wanted the money he would make, works out her own career without his help.

Thomas Mitchell is fine as Bert, manipulating his alcoholic depths and heights with ingenious variety and point which the script seldom supplies. The moment when he gets his first real offer for managing the funeral, and the whole sequence when he discovers the dead man's hand hanging out of the casket, are as beautifully hilarious as anything the stage offers.

Walter Abel is his more balanced crony, the doctor, who is willing to play along until the terms of his Hippocratic oath apply. Rhys Williams is an evangelistic druggist, at his best exhorting the powers that be that the tycoon's death is to the world's advantage.

Russ Brown has some delightful moments of self pity as the newspaperman whose whole reputation is at stake, and Lois Nettleton and Robert Readick are excellently cast as Bert's dancing daughter and self-reliant, ambitious beau who has his own incisive code.

Despite its absorption in an irreverent attitude toward death, the play is not offensive but rather funniest when it is most impious. This occasionally leads to bludgeoning and monotony, and in the end what it chiefly lacks is charm of any kind, except where the actors, Mitchell in particular, are able to dispel personal warmth across the stage.

Journal American

MARCH 31, 1949

Macabre Comedy Pokes Fun at Death

By ROBERT GARLAND

For two out of three literally cadaverous acts the comedy at the Mansfield pokes funereal fun at death and death's legendary dignity. Life takes a holiday in the early stanzas of "The Biggest Thief in Town." And, until its return, the Dalton Trumbo play is as merrily macabre as a Hollywood funeral reported by Aldous Huxley.

But when, two-thirds through the evening, the villainous cadaver that has been the piece's laughing-stock turns out to be no cadaver at all but a live and rather likable old millionaire, the funereal fun goes flat and you wonder at what, in the name of death and death's legendary dignity you have been cackling so curiously.

Yet there is no denying that what comes before is funny. Just why, I am not prepared to tell you. But I am prepared to tell you that as long as the rather likable old millionaire remains cadaverous and in his basket, "The Biggest Thief in Town" is more laughable than it has a right to be. A comic stiff should stay that way...

Not since, at the Fulton on a January night in 1941, Josephine Hull lifted the lid of an on-stage chest to discover a corpse with which she was not acquainted has a cadaver provided such lively laughter. But you didn't see that one, either!

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Beacon Snuffed

During the early acts of last night's arrival, which used to be called "The Emerald Staircase" and could have been called "Life Takes a Holiday," an unwanted ancient is a long time dying up on his castle-crowned hilltop overlooking Shale City, Colorado. As long as he is alive, a beacon burns in honor of his senectuous persistence.

In his undertaking parlor down on the main street, Bert Hutchins waits for the beacon to go out. For, as the whole town knows, when that beacon is no longer burning it means that John Troybalt has also been extinguished. Assisting Mr. Hutchins in his vigil are a Fourth Estateman, a Doctor and a Druggist, fellow townsmen and elbow benders.

Out goes the light! And, supposedly, the old millionaire goes with it. So, while in their cups and the high mood of adventure, what could be better than to kidnap the cadaver and keep the burial business in Shale City rather than have it go to Denver? No sooner said than done. Local undertaker makes good with local dead man.

But John Troybalt will not stay dead. And when he sits up and takes notice, the funereal fun that was once "The Biggest Thief in Town's" goes as flat and funless as the secondary story of Bert Hutchins' dancing daughter and her drugstore Fred Astaire.

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Fortunate in Cast

In its leading roles, the comedy at the Mansfield could scarcely be more fortunate. As a smalltown elbow-bending foursome, the Bert Hutchins of Thomas Mitchell, the Horton Paige of Russ Brown, the Jay Stewart of Walter Abel and the Sam Wilkins of Rhys Williams are first rate. Solo and in unison, their Shale City citizens are entertaining.

Lois Nettleton, making her Broadway bow as the undertaker's dancing daughter, is a likely looking refugee from television, radio and Chicago. Robert Readick, after seven thousand broadcasts, is likable as the drugstore Fred Astaire. William Kelly, of the original "Ben Hur" outfit, is a fine old fun killer as the less than dead cadaver.

Herman Shumlin has directed "The Biggest Thief in Town" as if it were another "The Little Foxes." But, in a superior setting by Leo Kerz, the Messrs. Mitchell, Brown, Abel and Williams team up on him and make two laughs grow where the playwright planted one. Toward the end, what might pass for sacrilege is no help...

If you want to laugh—and frequently against your better nature—the first two acts of "The Biggest Thief in Town" may be your nitrous oxide. But the laughing gas wears thin and a quick cadaver turns out to be less laughable than a dead one.